

Hell on Earth, 55 years ago



By Ray Bowden

Unless you have been there, it is hard to fathom the way it was on Dec. 7, 1941. Every once in a while, the flashback strikes, and it is just as vivid as it was the day it happened.

The USS Oklahoma was rolling over, and at a pretty good clip. Getting off the ship was a miracle in itself. I was one of the lucky ones. I wondered if I was going to make it. I had left more than 400 friends and shipmates behind to drown like rats.

Because the last few feet I was climbing almost straight up I thought for a bit that I wasn't going to make it. I could hear the rounds sliding out of the ready boxes as I climbed. Each anti-aircraft gun had a box behind it that was loaded with live ammunition. The locks had been broken off and the doors swung open as the ship listed to port. Then the rounds started falling out. They would hit the deck and either slide or roll off the ship.

Making one last desperate push I was able to grab the life lines and pull myself up so that I could climb through them. Navy war ships do not have a solid bulwark running around them, but have three chains fastened to removable stanchions or posts. This is so that during battle they can be lowered or removed so as not to interfere with the guns.

I climbed through the life line and found myself



standing on the starboard side of the ship looking down at its board bottom. If I jumped I would never clear the bottom so I found a clear space that did not have any intakes sticking out that could catch you.

I sat and prepared to shove off. As I did so, the Arizona blew up, killing more than 1,100 men. Most of those men are still in the ship. And the ship is still in commission. You could say these men

are still on active duty with God.

I pushed off and hit the water. I swam over to the USS Maryland and climbed aboard. It was here that I thought for sure I was going to meet my maker. I watched a Japanese plane dive on the Maryland, and watched the bomb he released as it left the plane. I was looking right at the business end of it and I swore it was headed right for where I was standing.

There were three of us standing behind a splinter shield. There was a young lieutenant standing on my right side almost shoulder to shoulder. On my left was a shipmate nearly touching me. I wondered what it was going to feel like being blown to bits.

As the bomb lost its forward momentum it began to drop and landed among the anchor chains. There were three chains made up of links that are about a foot long and weighing about 50 pounds each. When the bomb exploded it was about 100 feet or so from where I was standing. It threw



shrapnel and pieces of anchor chain all over the forward part of the ship. If that guy would have waited another second or so before he released the bomb I wouldn't be here to tell about it.

A piece of metal hit the officer in the throat and he bled to death as I tried to comfort him. The shipmate got a big chunk of metal in his leg. A piece hit me in the side breaking the skin and bruising some ribs. There was a big piece of metal laying between my feet.

I remember trying to move or duck, but something seemed to be holding me in place. Had I moved to the right I would have gotten that piece of metal the lieutenant got in the throat, and the piece that grazed me would have probably hit about where my heart is. Had I moved to the left that piece that was embedded in the shipmate's leg would have gotten my midsection. If I had ducked I would have gotten that piece that landed between my feet smack in the noggin.

Why couldn't I move? It wasn't fright and wasn't dumb luck, so it had to have been the hand of God holding me in place.

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